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## PETER BOEHLER'S OAK-TREE.

*A Paper read before the Society, at the Stated Meeting on  
March 9th, 1857.*

BY H. A. BRICKENSTEIN.

IN this matter-of-fact age the subject of the topography of the tree, under which the first Moravian Brethren who came to the Nazareth tract passed the night, may seem of trivial interest and of no consequence whatsoever. Without stopping to deplore, or endeavoring to controvert the evil tendencies of this materialistic, irreverent character of our day, we purpose, nevertheless, to devote a few pages to this very topic.

The following extract from Br. Levin T. Reichel's MS. History of the Moravian Church in America, is an appropriate introduction to the subject :—

“April 13th, 1740, the Moravian Brethren left Savannah, where they had gained many friends, of whom some (as Brownfield, James Burnside, H. T. Beck, and Abr. Bünin-ger [Bininger,] from Purisburg) [Purysburg,] afterwards followed them to Bethlehem. They traveled in Mr. Whitefield's company to Philadelphia, where they arrived on the 25th of April. It was a great disappointment to them to find here neither Spangenberg, who had left for Europe, nor Bishop Nitschman, whose arrival was daily expected. In their dilemma they went first to Christopher Wiegner [Wagner,] in Skippack, then to Henry Antes, Oley, and, finally, back to Germantown, where those who had

settled here in the year 1738, endeavored to persuade them to make their home. But Peter Boehler and Anthony Seiffert, though, for the moment, at a loss what to do, preferred to await Bishop Nitschman's arrival. Meanwhile, Mr. Whitefield had bought 5000 acres of land in the forks of the Delaware, (now Northampton County,) from Mr. William Allen, for £2200 sterling, intending to erect there a school for negro children. May 5th, he came to Christopher Wiegner's [Wagner's] plantation to see P. Boehler concerning the intended building, and, as some of the Brethren were carpenters, he proposed to them to do all the carpenter's work, for payment, and requested P. Boehler to take the general superintendence of the erection of the house. Many people having assembled to see and hear the famous Mr. Whitefield, he preached to them in English, and P. Boehler closed with a German address.<sup>1</sup>

"The next day P. Boehler and A. Seiffert, accompanied by H. Antes, set out to look for this tract in the Northern forest-wilds of Pennsylvania, and found, Saturday, May 7th, an extensive Indian village, where, at the present day, the Old Nazareth Farm buildings are standing. Having returned to Philadelphia and reported to Mr. Whitefield, he closed his contract with Mr. Allen, and called the tract Nazareth, once more renewing his proposition to the Brethren. After serious deliberations, and consulting the Lord, by lot they accepted Mr. Whitefield's proposal, glad to have found

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<sup>1</sup> W. Seward writes in his journal, April 24th, (old style :)—"It was surprising to see such a multitude of people gathered together in such a wilderness country, thirty miles distant from Philadelphia. Our brother was exceedingly carried out in his sermon, to press poor sinners to come to Christ by faith, and claim all their privileges, namely, not only righteousness and peace, but joy in the Holy Ghost; and, after he had done, our dear friend, Peter Boehler, preached in Dutch (German) to those who could not understand our brother in English."

at least a temporary occupation until Bishop Nitschman should arrive. After a three days' march from German-town, the company of seven brethren, two sisters, and two boys,<sup>1</sup> are found (May 30th) seated under a large forest tree, singing songs of praise and prayer to their Lord and Saviour."

The indefatigable exertions of our Nazareth antiquary, Br. A. G. Kern, have enabled him to point out with sufficient accuracy the spot where this tree stood; nay, he has even discovered what he believes to be its very stump.

Two venerable brethren, Mr. Christian Brunner and Mr. Godfrey Belling, whose recollections extend as far back as the year 1799, still distinctly remember having seen this tree as it then stood in the forest. It was a black-oak, and for many years the wood-chopper's axe turned away in reverence from its ancient trunk. It stood on a gentle acclivity, at whose base runs a little brook, meandering slowly through the rich meadows, and singing its low, cheerful song, now as it did then, when these homeless pilgrims stretched their weary limbs beside its whispering stream. The Koenigs-Strasse (King's Highway) extending from Bethlehem to the Indian settlements of Minnesink, ran close by the tree, through the present orchard (formerly belonging to the farm known as Plantation No. 4) to the Rose Tavern. In the year 1786, as we learn from the Nazareth Diary, the initials of P. Boehler and A. Seiffert's names, cut by themselves in the bark of the tree, were still visible. In the year 1799 they had become almost illegible, according to the brethren Brunner and Belling. Br. Charles Gotthold

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<sup>1</sup> P. Boehler, A. Seiffert, Martin Mack, John Boehner, G. Zeisberger and Rosina, his wife, Matthew Seybold, Hannah Hummel, Benj. Summers, and — James.

Reichel, Inspector of Nazareth Hall from 1785 to 1802, had a piece of leather, on which the names of Boehler and Seiffert were painted, affixed to the tree. When and how this *quercus sacra* fell, it has been impossible to ascertain, probably not, however, until after Br. Reichel's departure from Nazareth.

Among the many incidents of stirring interest connected with the early history of our Church in America, there are few more touching than that which this oak-tree witnessed. Rather than perform what was contrary to conscience, these brethren had abandoned their comfortable homes and smiling fields, and, trusting alone to the protecting providence of the Saviour, embarked for Pennsylvania. And here they are, singing glad hymns of thanksgiving and faith,—around them the dense forest, still and darksome; above them only the branches of the stalwart oak and the stars of the Almighty, so silent and watchful; and here they lay down to sleep in fearless security and trusting confidence. And if the task that awaited the learned Magister of Jena and his companions on the morrow was the humble one, as hired laborers, of digging out the foundations, and quarrying the stone, and felling and hewing the timber, to build another man's house, it was work cheerfully done, for it was labor performed in their Master's name, and for his glory.

As time rolls on, and mellows the valued pictures of the past, the site of this tree will be viewed with increasing interest by the pious Moravian, and by the admirer of genuine Christian heroism.